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MR. WELLS'S UTOPIAN PESSIMISM

THE various reactions of critics, professional and lay, to Mr. Wells's *Outline of History* remind us of the story in the old school readers of the six blind men who were introduced to the elephant. One, touching his broad side, pronounced the animal a wall; another, getting hold of his trunk, called him a snake; a third, running against his leg, declared that he "was very like a tree", and so on. Mr. Wells's reviewers have remarked on his courage (or foolhardiness) in entering the field of history without professional equipment. They have praised his style and pointed out his mistakes. They have selected, more or less at random, his treatment of important epochs or persons for laudatory or commendatory comment. They have rather sampled the *Outline* than estimated it as a whole. And indeed such a procedure is inevitable for one who would attempt in a few pages the "review" of Mr. Wells's work. For the two stout volumes are themselves a highly condensed and rapid review of the countless centuries of life upon our planet. It is the purpose of the present article to pass over the very interesting questions of detail which are suggested in every section of Mr. Wells's survey of history, and to examine his fundamental conception of the mission of history for mankind.

First of all, Mr. Wells believes that history has a very exalted mission. It is "the beginning and core of all sound philosophy and all great literature" (II, p. 36). It is purposeful and teleological, the matrix of the future, not the mummy of the past. The narrative of history is useful only as a stimulus to the realization of "the common adventure of all mankind", which is even in our own day only a purblind groping toward the world-state of universal peace, universal education, order, industriousness and comfort. "History is and must always be no more than an account of beginnings" (II, p. 594). Even when world-wide political and social unity shall have been attained (a consummation already present to the vision of seers, but destined to wait nobody knows how many ages for actual realization), "it will mean no resting stage, nor even a breathing stage, before the development of a new struggle and of new and vaster efforts. Men will unify only to intensify the search for knowledge and power, and live as ever for new occasions"

(*ibid.*). The curves of history and the earthly millennium, though asymptotic, are convergent. And it is just the index of convergence that matters in history. The past *quâ* past is as far beyond our power to change as the path of the stars. Its factual detail, therefore, of which our knowledge at all points is so highly precarious, cannot have that same exacting interest for Mr. Wells as for the historian of Ranke's school with his passion to know *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. It is the second clause of Cicero's formula in the *De Finibus* ("*praetermissa repetimus, inchoata persequimur*") that Mr. Wells emphasizes. Not the story, but the contribution of history, is the important thing. While, therefore, it is not inappropriate to criticize his telling of the story, it is more apposite to examine his estimate of the contribution.

Now it is Mr. Wells's thesis that history exhibits a constant, though not continuous, approximation to the ideal of a political and social unity of mankind in a "community of will". The progress is slow, and often interrupted. Roman hebetude, mediæval papacy, Machiavellian monarchy, modern worship of the State, mark "relapses", "back-waters", "eddies of faltering faith in a process altogether greater and altogether different in its general tendency" (II, p. 247). But at least since the wonderfully coincident dawn, about a half a millennium before Christ, in Athens, Judea and India, of the idea of the responsibility laid upon man for adding to his mental and moral stature by taking thought, "every generation has given evidence of men seeking for that better order to which they feel our world must come. . . . The last twenty-three centuries of history are like the efforts of some impulsive, hasty immortal to think clearly and live rightly. Blunder follows blunder; promising beginnings end in grotesque disappointments; streams of living water are poisoned by the cup that conveys them to the thirsty lips of mankind. But the hope of men rises again after every disaster" (I, p. 365).

And even when the cup is purged of its poison, it is a tantalus cup. Man's thirst is still not quenched. The tyranny of the present weighs as heavily as the tyranny of the past. We cannot any longer indulge in the assumptions of the eighteenth-century philosophers that mankind is now fairly out of the woods of barbarism, with a clear path to the heights of human perfection. In the complacent disquisition on the security of his own age which Gibbon appends to his thirty-eighth chapter under the title of "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West", he invites his

readers to "acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion" that the wealth, happiness, health and virtue of the human race are on the steady increase. Gibbon wrote those words in 1780. In the seven score years that have passed since then, what ghosts of murdered idealisms have risen to vex our feast—September Massacres, Poland, Tilsit, Peterloo, Novara, Manassas, Gastein, the Congo, Phoenix Park, Tripoli, Homestead, Spion Kop, the *Lusitania*, Brest-Litovsk, Versailles! Not yet can we know whether our age is rising to the crest or sinking to the trough in the ceaseless roll of the waves of human history. Or, to use Mr. Wells's own simile, "Like its predecessor, our present civilization may be no more than one of those crops which farmers sow to improve their land by the fixation of nitrogen from the air. It may have grown only that, accumulating certain traditions, it may be ploughed into the soil again for better things to follow. Such questions are the practical realities of history, and in all that follows we shall find them becoming clearer and more important until in our last chapter we shall end, as all our days and years end, with a recapitulation of our hopes and fears—and a note of interrogation" (II, p. 158).

We can take little comfort, then, from the actual course of history. It is a record of shattered hopes, of swiftly-clouded dawns. Noble religions arose only to be debased forthwith; the intellectual freedom of the Greeks was enslaved by the pedantry of Alexandria; the universal Roman state was "a colossally ignorant and unimaginative empire", vitiated by its total failure to educate its citizens politically or culturally, a veritable Neanderthal civilization whose incuriousness was "more massive and monumental even than its architecture" (I, p. 532). The ten centuries and more from Augustine to Martin Luther were "very largely the history of the failure of the great idea of a divine world government to realize itself in practice" (I, p. 605). The Machiavellian monarchies which rose on the ruins of the Holy Roman Empire have obsessed the imagination of Europe and Western Asia with a mythology of the "Powers", and filled Christendom with the turmoil of their hates and conflicts, which will "seem to some future generation as reasonless and insane as those dead, now incomprehensible feuds of the *greens* and *blues* that once filled the streets of Byzantium with shouting and bloodshed" (II, p. 247). This period of nationalism Mr. Wells calls an "Age of Confusion", an "interregnum". "We are living in it today: it may be drawing to its close; we cannot yet tell" (II, p. 216).

The Marquise du Châtelet said that she "could not overcome the disgust with which all modern history since the fall of the Roman Empire inspired her". For Mr. Wells the political history of Europe is not more edifying: "Europe during those eleven centuries of the imitation Caesars which began with Charlemagne and which closed only in the monstrous bloodshed of 1914-1918 has been like a busy factory owned by a somnambulist, who is sometimes quite unimportant and sometimes disastrously in the way" (II, p. 56). Recalling Sir Harry Johnston's description of the Neanderthal man as "a shambling, hairy, brutish, but probably very cunning creature with a big brain *behind*", Mr. Wells says that we must still use similar terms to describe the soul of a politician. The statesman has "still to oust the politician from his lair and weapon heaps". "History has still to become a record of human dignity" (II, p. 496).

Yet out of the carcass Mr. Wells brings honey. The "note of interrogation" with which he concludes his historical survey changes into a note of triumph as he moves on to the more congenial and familiar ground of prophecy. Near the close of his work Mr. Wells "apes Roger Bacon in his prophetic mood", and lays down what he calls "the broad fundamentals of the coming world-state of the community of will" (II, p. 586). It is to be a state based on religion, but on no particular religion—"religion pure and undefiled"; a state in which the whole race and not merely classes and peoples will be educated; a state without armies or navies, wealthy or poor, drudges or idlers, foreign offices or crooked elections. Every vestige of nationalistic monarchy will be swept out of the world, and the skies will be "clear again for the great peace of the federation of mankind" (II, p. 243). "For only the spiritlessness of our present depression blinds us to the clear intimation of our reason that in the course of a few generations every little country town could become an Athens, every human being could be gentle in breeding and healthy in body and mind, the whole solid earth man's mine and its uttermost regions his playground" (II, p. 590). It is for these pages that the book has been written, and by the author's confession, it "has been ill-written if it has failed to convey our conviction of the character of the state towards which our world is moving" (II, p. 586).

Without the slightest wish to play the *advocatus diaboli*, we may ask whether Mr. Wells's conclusions are contained in his premises. Does the Outline of History as he presents it prefigure an earthly

millennium? To answer this question in the affirmative we should have to see history as an evolution toward Utopia. The last state of man should be demonstrably the best. Those great desiderata of universal education, world peace, a universal kingdom of righteousness, government by the free and enlightened expression of the common will, which Mr. Wells lays down as the foundations of his new state, should appear at least in outline, arising from the wreck of the old, implicit in history. Instead, they are summoned as gods of the machine. The history of the ages is not so much their har-binger as their foil. They are prophesied and posited all through the book, in discrete, compensatory propositions, and not evolved from the story. And this, I believe, is due to certain capital faults in Mr. Wells's conception of history, which cannot be redeemed even by the conspicuous qualities of industry, fertility, brilliance and comprehensiveness which appear in the work.

Mr. Wells deals too much with characters. He not only makes history read like a novel (which is a rare art), but he constructs history like a novel. History is for him a succession of *situations* centering in the qualities and fortunes of prominent men. The wise counsel of Lord Acton to play no favorites in history, nor to wonder overmuch when an idol falls or a skeleton is uncovered, Mr. Wells ignores. He revels in personalities, often descending to gossip and trivialities about Cato's slaves or Charles V's menus or Gladstone's complexion and fine baritone voice. The significance of Hellenism escapes him in his absorption in Alexander's dissipations. Such fundamental aspects of the Napoleonic era as the dissemination of Revolutionary principles or the economic world disturbance caused by the "Continental System" are left to one side while we are regaled with details of the vanity, vulgarity and vacuity of the Corsican upstart. For the evolution of institutions, for the tremendous hold on peoples and states of traditions rooted centuries deep, for the social and political systems whose slow modifications make the history of civilization, Mr. Wells has little sympathy. Why couldn't the Alexandrians have discovered printing—it is such a simple device! Why didn't the stupid Romans have a *bona fide* parliament and honest elections! Why all the "diplomatic fussing, posturing and scheming, all the intrigues and bloodshed . . . all the monstrous turmoil and waste of kings and armies, all the wonderful attitudes, deeds, schemes of the Cavours, Bismarcks, Disraelis, Bonapartes and the like 'great men', when they might very well have been avoided altogether had Europe but had the sense to instruct a

small body of ordinarily honest ethnologists, geographers and sociologists to draw out its proper boundaries and prescribe suitable forms of government in a reasonable manner!" (II, p. 449). So simple! Even Mr. Wells alone can do it. He "draws out" the "natural political map of Europe" (II, p. 383), with Latins, Teutons, Slavs, Greeks, Magyars, Turks all in their proper confines, where they should have been put and kept long ago—by a "small body of ordinarily honest ethnologists". Yet Woodrow Wilson has been called rashly idealistic for certain propensities toward map-making in Europe.

As for nationalism, it is a species of "megalomania": "We may suggest", says Mr. Wells, "that a nation is in effect any assembly, mixture, or confusion of people which is either afflicted by or wishes to be afflicted by a foreign office of its own, in order that it should behave collectively as if it alone constituted humanity" (II, p. 433). "Those strange beings" England, France or Germany are the modern idols that have replaced Bel and Dagon, and a man had better not jeer at them if he prizes his life (II, p. 246). Foreign ministers, "statesmen" and politicians have learned nothing since the beginning. They were still in the nineteenth century "no more than a number of troublesome and occasionally incendiary school-boys—and a few mental thieves—playing about and doing transitory mischief amid the accumulated materials upon the site of a great building whose nature they did not understand" (II, p. 385). There is much more to the same purpose, but it is neither sane nor edifying. We can hardly avoid the conclusion that as a historian Mr. Wells has "run amuck" here. It almost justifies the summary of his position by a recent reviewer: "I kick from my feet the footstool Earth and soar into the illimitable inane!"

My title is not an oxymoron. Utopianism *is* pessimism in history. It is a counsel of despair, a refuge of the imagination, a renunciation of the challenge of the actual. The final impression which the *Outline of History* makes on me is that Mr. Wells doesn't really care much about history: it has all been so futile! He is interested in the millennium, and he uses the story of human history, as Orosius did fifteen centuries ago, to furnish instances of the folly of mankind. The steeds of his imagination have broken the traces and left the chariot stranded.

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